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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TAIPEI 000292

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SUBJECT: KMT LOOKS TO MAKE INROADS IN DPP SOUTHERN HEARTLAND

Classified By: AIT Director Stephen M. Young,
Reasons: 1.4 (b/d)

¶1. (C) Summary: As the campaign enters its final stage, the KMT believes that presidential candidate Ma Ying-jeou's campaigning and "long-stay" program in the south will boost his support among voters in the traditional DPP "heartland." Local KMT and DPP officials say Ma's prospects are being helped by southern voters' growing concerns about the state of the economy, unemployment, and education. Although none predict Ma will win an outright majority of the southern vote, they believe Hsieh faces an uphill battle to replicate President Chen's strong performance in 2004, when he carried the south by a margin of 670,000 votes. KMT officials expect more "surprise" attacks on Ma's credibility from the Hsieh campaign, but they say Ma is prepared to deflect such attacks, which they think do not have a lasting effect on voter preferences. Ma is more popular than Hsieh with young southern voters, the officials observe, a shift that could help the KMT cut into the DPP support base in this pan-Green region in future elections. End Summary.

Southern Taiwan Becoming a Key Electoral Battleground

¶2. (C) The KMT has succeeded in turning southern Taiwan, traditionally a DPP stronghold, into a key battleground in the March 22 presidential election. KMT officials told visiting AIT/T polloffs, accompanied by AIT/K, that the party and candidate Ma have paid more attention to wooing southern voters than in the past, noting that strong showings in the recent legislative elections show the KMT has been gaining ground in what is considered the DPP's traditional "heartland." KMT and DPP officials say southern voters are turning to Ma more than in the past because of their heightened concerns over the economy, unemployment, and education.

¶3. (C) KMT and DPP officials from Kaohsiung City recently told AIT that DPP candidate Frank Hsieh needs to win the south by at least one million votes, carrying Kaohsiung City by at least 100,000 votes, in order to win the March 22 presidential election. However, DPP City Councilor Chou Ling-wen predicted that Hsieh will probably win Kaohsiung City by only 20,000 votes, far short of the 100,000 margin he would need to help offset expected losses in the north. DPP

Kaohsiung City Chairman Chang Chih-ming, on the other hand, projected Hsieh could win the city by as many as 150,000 votes if a ground swell of support materializes in the final weeks of the election. KMT City Chairman Hsu Fu-ming said that the party's goal is for Ma to win 51 percent of the vote in Kaohsiung City. Ma's Kaohsiung campaign spokesman Lo Shih-hsiung suggested Ma could win Kaohsiung City by 3 to 5 percentage points, roughly the same margin of victory the KMT garnered in the January 12 legislative elections. (Note: Running for reelection in 2004, President Chen Shui-bian carried Kaohsiung City by about 102,000 votes, while Hsieh won his reelection as Kaohsiung Mayor in 2002 by 25,000 votes. More recently, however, the 2006 mayoral election was a virtual dead heat, while the KMT bested the DPP by 20,000 votes in party preference voting in the January 12 legislative elections.)

Ma Appealing to Young Voters' Pocketbooks

¶4. (C) Ma's positions on issues most important to young voters, particularly income and job opportunities, are helping him make inroads into this voting bloc, which is expected to be a significant part of the turn-out in the region. DPP City Councilor Chou Ling-wen, whose constituency includes many young voters, told AIT that Ma's star appeal and young voters' concerns about the economy are helping Ma gain support from this group, which in previous elections has supported the DPP. Chou estimated that youth and college-aged voters (ages 20-29) now favor the KMT 60-40 percent, and she expects the turnout rate for young voters in the presidential election to be about 40-50 percent. In a separate meeting, Professor Liao Dachi of National Sun Yat-sen University agreed with these figures.

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Debates and Scandal Tactics Having Little Effect

¶5. (C) The minimal impact of the presidential debates and Hsieh's attacks on Ma's credibility makes it unlikely there will be any dramatic change in support among southern voters for either candidate, local party officials told AIT. DPP Kaohsiung City chairman Chang Chih-ming expressed disappointment with the outcome of the first presidential debate on February 24, which boosted support for Hsieh in the polls by only 2 points, rather than the 10 points the DPP had been hoping for. DPP and KMT contacts agreed that Ma's "green-card issue" was not having a significant effect on voters' decisions. Nevertheless, both DPP and KMT sources suggested that Hsieh would make some tactical moves to "shock" voters in the run-up to the election. Chang told AIT that the Ma campaign has prepared responses to a range of possible last minute scenarios that Hsieh might use before the election.

Comment

¶6. (C) The pessimism of some Kaohsiung DPP officials suggests that Hsieh will be hard pressed to repeat President Chen's strong performance in the south in 2004. KMT officials, however, are taking care not to appear overconfident, hoping that any last minute campaign "surprises" will not derail Ma's momentum going into the final stretch of the election. Ma is scheduled to make a series of campaign appearances in the south in the final two weeks, while Hsieh is looking to rally his core base and boost turnout.

¶7. (U) AIT/K contributed to this cable.
YOUNG